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# THE MAILS AS A GERMAN WAR WEAPON

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## MEMORANDUM ON THE CENSORSHIP OF MAILS CARRIED BY NEUTRAL SHIPS

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LONDON :  
EYRE AND SPOTTISWOODE, LIMITED.  
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1916.

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THE objects of the examination of the mails passing between Europe and America are :—

- (1) To discover and frustrate the plots hatched by our enemies in their own or in neutral countries ;
- (2) To restrict the enemy's supplies, and in every other way to impair their capacity to continue the war.

In pursuance of the former of these two objects a very large number of letters have been intercepted, the seizure of which, from a military and naval point of view, must be regarded as of the highest importance.

It is regretted that specimens of these letters cannot be published, nor can details of them be given, without prejudicing the action taken to frustrate the designs of the enemy.

But it may be mentioned that they include numbers of letters of the following types :—

(a) Letters relative to and furthering the perpetration of acts of violence, incendiarism and *sabotage* in the United States.

(b) Letters embodying plans for interfering with the supply of vital materials to the Allies from neutral countries.

(c) Letters containing enemy propaganda.

This last item includes a great quantity of scurrilous leaflets and pamphlets despatched by the enemy, generally under neutral cover, to the United States and other neutral countries in order that they may be re-forwarded for circulation in British territory (e.g., British India) for the sole and deliberate purpose of fostering disloyalty and rebellion within the Empire.

It will no doubt be readily admitted by all impartial persons in neutral countries that, in so far as the British Censorship restricts the area of intrigue, sedition and outrage, it is serving not only the cause of the Allies

but the interests of neutrals also. Many tons of enemy propaganda leaflets and pamphlets found in the letter mails have been destroyed each week in the Censorship and sold as paper waste.

The second of the two objects mentioned above is effected in three totally distinct ways :—

1. By stopping supplies to and exports by the enemy actually found in the mail bags.
2. By stopping documents the purpose of which is to transfer money or credit to the enemy.
3. By extracting from letters evidence of attempts to evade the blockade and information showing the channels of hostile trade, communication, etc.

#### 1. ENEMY IMPORTS AND EXPORTS BY LETTER MAIL.

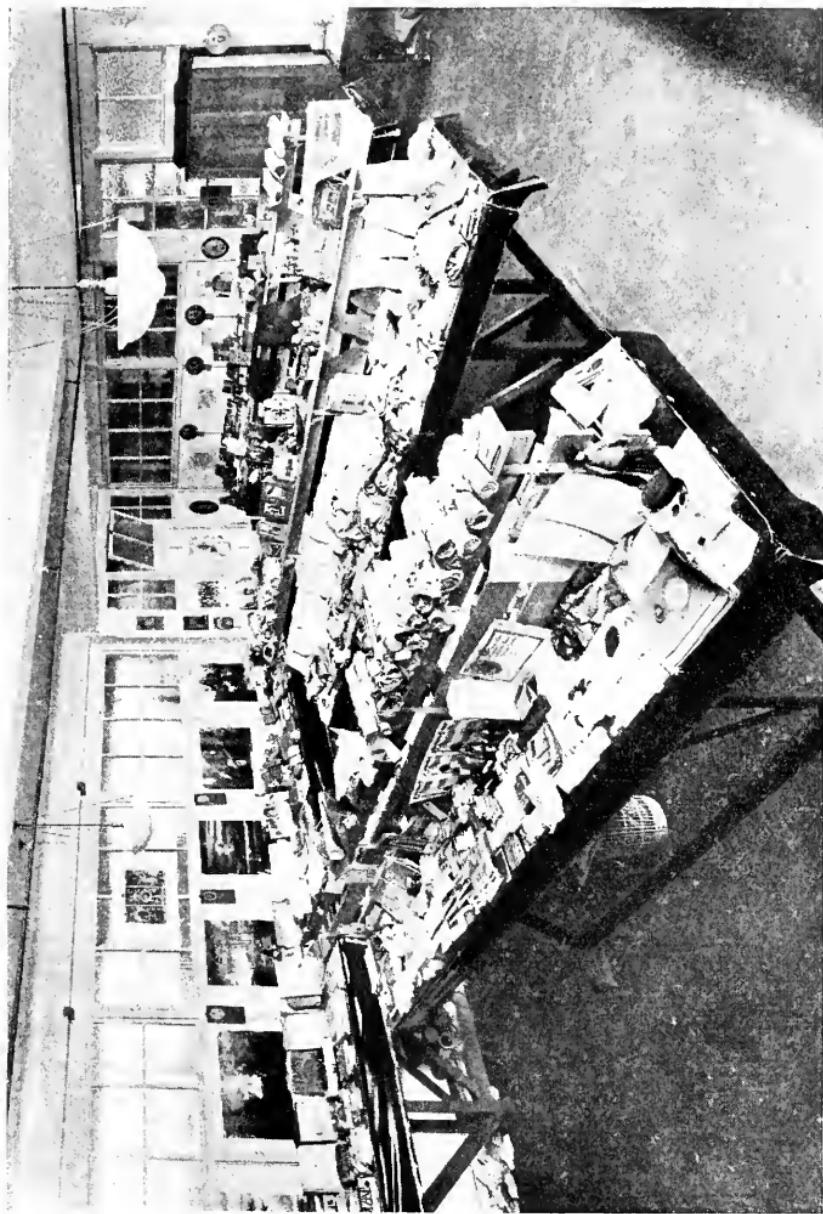
It is not thought that anyone now seriously contends that the British Government should allow supplies to reach enemy



NEWSPAPERS IN VARIOUS LANGUAGES PUBLISHED OR INSPIRED BY GERMANY.



POSTAL CENSORSHIP LIBRARY.  
With specimens of German propagandist literature.



### THE CENSOR'S MUSEUM.

Containing specimens of merchandise found in first class mails.

## THE CENSOR'S MUSEUM.

Another view, showing rubber in foreground.



countries, or merchandise to be exported from them merely because very high charges for carriage have been paid. This is the sole distinction between consignments by letter post and other consignments, and, as regards the former, the Censors merely follow the recognised procedure for dealing with merchandise liable to seizure in time of war. When the examination of these first-class mails was commenced, a considerable quantity of commodities most urgently required by the enemy was found addressed direct to consignees in Germany, and large quantities of German exports of small bulk, but relatively high value, were also found. These goods had, in many cases, been despatched without any attempt to conceal their origin or destination. From the first few mails examined, over 3,000 packets of raw rubber, as well as the manufactured article in a great variety of forms, were seized on their way to Germany, while the German exports thus intercepted represented practically every article which that country could afford to export, and which

was capable of being despatched in this costly manner (viz., *inter alia*, jewellery, drugs, machine needles, and violin strings).

As soon, however, as it became known that merchandise sent by letter mail was not, in future, to pass unmolested, firms on both sides of the Atlantic interested in upholding the economic position of the Central Powers were forced to attempt all kinds of subterfuges before abandoning this last remaining expedient for evading the Allied Blockade. The greatest ingenuity was accordingly exercised to disguise the real origin or destination of merchandise, and to conceal the goods themselves. For instance, a careful examination of the wrapping of certain intercepted packets of photographs revealed the fact that a bar of pure nickel was concealed in each fluting of the corrugated-paper wrapping. Packets described as, and appearing to contain, photographs, were found, upon closer examination, to consist, in reality, of a large number of ingeniously packed sheets of dental rubber.

It is not suggested that the seizure of merchandise from the letter mails is as important as many of the other functions performed by the Censorship. But the letter mails would certainly be used on a much larger scale for the conveyance of contraband goods but for the control exercised by the Censor.

## 2. SECURITIES AND REMITTANCES.

During the year 1915 numerous indications proved that Germany was unloading her foreign securities on a very extensive scale, and that this policy was approved, if not actually engineered, by the German Government. There can be no doubt that this realisation of foreign securities greatly assisted the enemy in acquiring funds for investment in their national war loans, in improving the American exchange, in bolstering up their credit abroad, and in financing purchases in neutral countries. In the first two months after the Censorship was extended to mails carried by neutral ships

voluntarily entering British territorial waters, securities to the approximate face value of two millions sterling were seized and placed in the Prize Court on good *prima facie* evidence of enemy origin. The effect of this has been greatly to depreciate the value in neutral markets of securities bearing evidence of enemy ownership, and to reduce almost to vanishing point the volume of securities despatched by mail, directly or indirectly, from Germany to America for realisation.

#### REMITTANCES

An enormous number of letters containing cheques, drafts, money orders and remittances in various forms, in course of transmission for enemy benefit, have also been detained, the value represented by which up to date is well over £50,000,000.

#### 3. INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM THE EXAMINATION OF THE MAILS

It must be frankly admitted that the value to the Allies of the information ex-

tracted from letters in the course of their passage through the Censorship is far greater than was anticipated, for it could hardly have been possible to realise, except in the light of actual experience, the extraordinary thoroughness and ingenuity with which the enemy were exploiting the International Postal Service for belligerent purposes. Innumerable plots and devices of a most ingenious character for evading the Blockade, and transmitting supplies to the enemy by indirect methods, have been detected in the course of examining these mails, and, in consequence, frustrated.

It is, perhaps, unnecessary to say that enemy traders are as well aware as the British Censors of the importance of their correspondence as evidence of the real origin or destination of goods shipped from, or to, a neutral country, and that the most valuable evidence is not found in letters addressed direct to, or posted in, enemy territory, but in correspondence passing between persons or firms in neutral countries. In an intercepted letter from a German firm

in New York to their Berlin house, the writers ask the addressees to request all their friends to forward letters in small envelopes with addresses written by ladies, and with covers addressed to ladies, and suggest that, for this purpose, correspondence should be subdivided as much as possible when forwarded. They declare that the principal object of this is to ascertain whether the British Censorship is thorough in its examination of enemy correspondence, or is mainly guided by the external appearance of the envelope.

There can be no better evidence of the importance of the Censorship as a belligerent weapon than the efforts of the enemy to excite agitation against it in neutral countries, and the multiplicity and ingenuity of their devices for evading it.

#### METHODS AND ORGANISATION OF THE CENSORSHIP

The detection of correspondence of the three classes referred to above involves the

examination of a very large number of letters from one firm to another in regard to transactions with which the British Government has no desire to interfere. It is probably this fact which has given rise to the suspicion, apparently entertained in certain quarters in the United States, that the British Censorship is being used as a means of capturing American trade. The British Minister of Blockade has already denied in the most formal manner that the Censorship is put to any such use, but this opportunity may well be taken to repeat the denial.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the general and statistical information extracted from trade letters, which has proved so invaluable to the Allied Governments in checking the supply of materials through neutral to enemy countries, and in preventing the export of enemy goods, is used for these purposes solely, and never as a means of capturing neutral trade. The activities of neutral traders are of no interest whatever to the Postal Censorship, except in so far

as they involve transactions for the benefit of the enemy.

It has been suggested that, although information in regard to purely neutral trade may not be obtained by the Censorship for official use, the individuals engaged in reading the correspondence may divulge its contents to British firms, who may themselves make use of it for their own benefit. The answer to this suggestion is that the employment in the Censorship of men who would break, in such a manner, their solemn obligation to secrecy would be as great a danger from the British as it would from the neutral point of view. A man of this stamp could, for example, reveal to one British firm the trade secrets of another and otherwise improperly use his opportunities of information to the detriment of British interests. A Censorship conducted by such persons would be worse than useless, and every precaution is taken to select for the work men whose credentials are unimpeachable.

It is true that, as in every other service

of this kind, a black sheep is occasionally admitted in spite of all preliminary precautions. But a carefully organised system of control and supervision has been established, and the discovery of any irregularity of the nature referred to is followed by instant dismissal.

This accusation against the British Censors is only one of many made or inspired by those who suffer, and who are intended to suffer, by the Censorship, but who prefer to make themselves the champions of neutral interests rather than of their own.

Other groundless accusations which have been circulated in this manner are:—

(1) That the letters are read and their fate decided by young girls ; and

(2) That the letters are forwarded or destroyed according to the momentary whim of the reader.

(1) The true facts are that women, none of whom are less than twenty-five years of age, are employed to read those letters only which do not require a business education to under-

stand them, with instructions to pass to properly qualified male Censors any letter dealing with commercial or financial matters which has been, in the first place, distributed to the women instead of to the men, owing to its having purposely been disguised as a "private" letter.

(2) No letter is detained without reference to a competent Officer of the Censorship, and no letters are ever destroyed.

It is admitted that, at the outset, neutral correspondence in which enemy interests were in no way concerned was subjected to a delay which is greatly regretted, and which has since been reduced to a minimum. It must not be imagined that the mails were removed from neutral ships for examination without careful consideration of the arrangements which would be required to deal with them as quickly as possible. All preparations which seemed necessary were made with this object, but, unfortunately, those responsible for them were not aware of some of the difficulties which would be encountered. For instance, there

was no reason to suppose that (as proved to be the case) bags purporting to contain mails from one neutral country to another would contain nothing but mails to or from an enemy country, or that bags represented as containing printed matter would contain not only correspondence of all kinds, registered and unregistered, but also articles such as rubber, coffee, jewellery, etc. It was not, moreover, anticipated that persons writing to or from enemy countries would have already adopted the practice of sending their letters under cover to intermediaries in neutral countries, or that great numbers of complete sacks, appearing to contain merely business circulars from neutral countries, would contain, in reality, nothing but propaganda from Germany under covers bearing neutral postage stamps.

These and similar unforeseen peculiarities made it impossible, until the staff engaged had been largely increased and had become accustomed to them, to select on any fixed principle those mail bags which, when all could

not be examined within a reasonable period, should be forwarded without examination.

#### SHIPPING DOCUMENTS

The delay to shipping documents was, at one time, the subject of complaints. But this difficulty has now been obviated by arrangements for the transmission of such documents in specially marked bags, which are dealt with by a special staff of Censors at the port of call, and are forwarded to destination by the same ship in which they were despatched.

#### DELAY TO THE MAILED

Every effort has been made to reduce to the utmost extent possible the delay to which ordinary mails are subjected by their removal for censorship, and so great has been the desire not to injure legitimate neutral business that in the past, in cases where the staff has been insufficient to cope with a particular mail in a given time, large numbers of letters

have been sent on uncensored. Increases of staff and various improvements in organisation which are the outcome of practical experience have now reduced the period of delay to a minimum. (*Vide Appendix.*)

It must be explained that, in spite of the assertions of those who wish to make the Censorship a scapegoat for every inconvenience suffered by correspondents at the present time, the British authorities are in no way responsible for the fact that mails from the United States to Holland and Scandinavia are not despatched by the quickest route, viz., by the fast British or American liners to Liverpool, a course which would greatly mitigate the delays complained of.

It has been suggested that considerable loss of time would be avoided if mails landed at Kirkwall were examined at and despatched from that port instead of being brought to London. The advisability of such a course received careful consideration, but, quite apart from the obvious practical difficulty of accommodating, supervising and controlling a suffi-

ciently large staff in such a remote and isolated place as Kirkwall, two insuperable difficulties presented themselves, viz. :—

(1) Either the ship must be kept waiting while the mail was examined and replaced, a course which, in the case of a heavy mail, would obviously result in serious delay to ship, cargo and passengers ;

(2) Or the mail must be kept waiting for the next ship calling at Kirkwall, which might not arrive for many days, and, when she did arrive, might not be able to take the mail on board.

It was therefore decided that the only safe method of ensuring prompt re-transmission was to despatch the bags from the great English ports where there are frequent and regular sailings, and, in order to do this, the mails have to be sent south as far as Liverpool, Newcastle, Hull, Tilbury or Harwich. London was thought to be the most convenient centre for distribution to these ports, and it has been found that the advantages derived from cen-

tralisation far outweigh the loss of a few hours at the most in railway transit

#### CONCLUSION

The creation of entirely new departments and machinery in time of war is a task of extraordinary difficulty, and defects are bound to arise which can only be rectified in the light of practical experience. Every complaint received from neutral sources, which has appeared to be susceptible of remedy, has received careful and sympathetic consideration, and, wherever possible, without impairing the efficiency of the Censorship or defeating its primary objects, has been made the basis of improvements in method and routine.

It may be stated with confidence that the work of the Censorship could not be executed with greater expedition or with less detriment to neutral interests than it is at present by the immense and vigilantly supervised organisation which has been established for the purpose in London.

## APPENDIX

I.—*Mails from United States to Holland.*

(a) If not removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Falmouth -	-	1st June.
Leave Falmouth -	-	3rd June.
Arrive Rotterdam	-	<u>6th June.</u>
Total	-	<u>6 days.</u>

(b) If removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Falmouth -	-	1st June.
Received in London	-	1st June (or 3.30 a.m., 2nd June)

Despatched after examination :—

At earliest	-	-	2nd June.
At latest	-	-	5th June.

Arrive Rotterdam :—

At earliest	-	-	3rd June.
At latest	-	-	7th June.*

Total (minimum) - 3 days.

Total (maximum) - 7 days.

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\* Extra day allowed, as there is no despatch to Holland on three days in the week.

II.—*Mails from Holland to United States.*

(a) If not removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Falmouth - - 2nd June.

Leave Falmouth - - 4th June.

Arrive New York - - 12th June.

Total - - 11 days.

(b) If removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Falmouth - - 2nd June.

Received in London - - 3rd June (or 3.30 a.m., 4th June).

Despatched after examination :—

At earliest - - 4th June.

At latest - - 5th June

Arrive New York :—

At earliest - - 13th June.

At latest - - 14th June.

Total (minimum) - - 13 days.

Total (maximum) - - 14 days.

III.—*Mails from United States to Denmark.*

(a) If not removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Kirkwall	-	1st June.
Arrive Copenhagen	-	4th June.
Total	-	<u>4 days.</u>

(b) If removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Kirkwall	-	1st June.
Received in London	-	3rd June.

Despatched after examination :—

At earliest	-	-	4th June.
At latest	-	-	7th June.

Arrive Copenhagen :—

At earliest	-	-	7th June.
At latest	-	-	10th June.

Total (minimum) - 7 days.

Total (maximum) - 10 days.

IV.—*Mails from Denmark to United States.*

(a) If not removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Kirkwall - - 1st June.

Arrive New York - - 11th June.

Total - - 11 days.

(b) If removed from the ship by which they were despatched :—

Arrive Kirkwall - - 1st June.

Received in London - - 3rd June.

Despatched after examination :—

At earliest - - 4th June.

At latest - - 5th June.

Arrive New York :—

At earliest - - 13th June.

At latest - - 15th June.

Total (minimum) - - 13 days.

Total (maximum) - - 15 days.

N.B.—These figures are based on the experience of the summer months, but, so far as they relate to the sailings and duration of voyages of the ships concerned, they cannot be absolutely vouched for, owing to alterations and uncertainties to which the movements of all ships are continually subject.



